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Wrecking crews take gold

CRAIG SIMONS

Number 4, Little Gold Silk Alley in central Beijing, has witnessed a lot of history. A traditional courtyard home with a fishpond and sweeping tile roofs, it was 20 years old when imperial rule ended in 1911. During the 1950s, when the Communist Party built scores of factories in Beijing and needed places to house workers, it was partitioned to accommodate six additional families. During the Cultural Revolution, the decade of Mao Zedong-inspired madness in the 60s and 70s, Red Guards burst through the wooden front doors and ransacked its furniture because it represented part of the detested "old China".

Now 53-year-old Luo Yuxiu and her family wonder how much longer their ancestral home, situated only a few kilometres from the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, will survive. Little Gold Silk Alley, a narrow residential lane or *hutong*, is within one of 35 historic, protected zones within the city. But while Beijing has promised to put on hold plans to develop further old sections of the capital, residents like Mrs Luo continue to worry that their homes will be destroyed to make room for high-rise developments as well as trendy shops and bars, which have already started moving in. "Since the 80s the government has been talking about saving the *hutongs*, but they still knock them down," 34-year-old neighbour Yang Wei said. "I think sooner or later they'll destroy this lane."

The physical transformation of Beijing, partly in preparation for the 2008 Olympics, pits modernisation against preservation, and Xu Yong, the owner of Beijing's Hutong Tours, said the forces of change are winning. Mr Xu's agency takes 120,000 tourists annually through alleys such as Little Gold Silk. "*Hutongs* and courtyard houses represent Beijing," he said. "If you destroy them, this city is no longer interesting."

In the lead-up to the Olympics, China plans to spend more than US\$3 billion (HK\$23.4 billion) building and renovating 32 competition venues and a slew of related facilities, including a skyscraper that will tower over the Olympic Park at the heart of a new urban centre.

The city is also developing several new business districts, one of which, the Chaoyang Central Business District, will cover four square kilometres and serve as Beijing's Manhattan.

The largest project within Beijing's second ring road, where many of the city's most important cultural and religious sites are situated, is a 5.6-million-square-metre zone the government plans to use as a media centre during the Olympics.

City planner Cai Jianhua, 32, is on a team overseeing the construction, and he wants to create a first-world feeling. "We are taking ideas from American cities like Houston and Chicago," he said, pointing to several scale models of the street, to be called International Media Boulevard.

One of the buildings on the thoroughfare, the 22-storey glass-and-steel International Media Centre, would not be out of place in Hong Kong, Singapore or New York. Construction has already started near the 15th-century Qianmen gate, one of the few remaining parts of the wall that once separated Beijing's inner city (with its cultural and religious relics) from its sprawling outer suburbs.

Another extensive project being considered by Beijing leaders is a plan to remake a 24km central axis that would stretch from the Olympic Park in the north to an undeveloped land tract near the city's fifth ring road in the south, and incorporate many of the city's most important cultural and historic sites, including the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and the Temple of Heaven, the Ming dynasty complex where emperors prayed for good harvests.

Last year the government commissioned plans from seven companies, including Japan's Nikken Sekkei, France's Arep, Germany's Albert Speer & Partner (AS&P) and four Chinese firms. Qinghua University Institute of Planning and Design and Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute are behind two of the Chinese designs; the other two are state-run.

Of the seven, AS&P's design has received the most attention, not least because its head planner, Albert Speer, is the son of Adolf Hitler's chief architect. Speer senior built the Nazi leader's Berlin headquarters and drew up plans for Germania, the planned Nazi capital; his son's proposal to reshape Beijing shows the same hallmark of ambition. Instead of aiming to glorify a government, AS&P's plan wraps environmental and cultural protection with an initiative to revamp the city's outdated public transport system.

A central part of Mr Speer's plan is a new train station in the south that, according to a company brochure, would be the "gateway to the Chinese capital", a hub for public transport and, possibly, an arrival point for a proposed magnetic high-speed train running between Beijing and Shanghai.

Just north of the station Mr Speer envisages a six-square-km Ecological Park as an "experimental area for traditional and new forms of agriculture". He also conceptualises the city centre as a pedestrian zone with parks and clean canals flanked by tree-lined promenades, and suggests that the city build a wind farm, employ solar power and use cutting-edge concepts for the use of rainwater.

Mr Speer is not the only one thinking green. Nikken Sekkei promises to create a "network of water and greenery" along the central axis. The company's proposal also suggests moving all the main roads that cross the axis underground, creating "wind corridors" that will provide "natural heating and cooling throughout the city" and building a small urban commuter airport in the south within 30 minutes of the city centre.

Designers also took into account the traditional Chinese philosophy of *fung shui* to suggest a series of "curved green roads" for pedestrians to enjoy. Another proposal was that the government move some of its buildings from the centre north, where there will be a square zone "depicting 'earth', the dominion of heaven and the gods".

Arep's brochure advises that Beijing build a series of museums and research centres along the axis to take advantage of its historical role as the spiritual focus of the city. Apart from planning an exposition centre, archaeological research centre and Scientific and Technical Palace in the north, the company proposes constructing a Museum of China, an ecological research centre and a new music academy on the shores of Beihai Lake north of the Forbidden City. The academy, the company brochure states, could hold concerts in the "enchanted setting".

An official at the Beijing Municipal Urban Planning Commission, the office charged with city development, said it would soon hold a meeting of specialists to discuss the proposals and had yet to decide which ideas they would adopt. However, according to Sun Zhuo, a Beijing architect and AS&P consultant, city leaders are unlikely to use any design entirely. Instead she predicted officials would cobble together their own scheme using ideas from all the proposals. One of the proposals in the Qinghua plan is to reconstruct a canal that ran south of Qianmen gate but was filled in during the 1950s. Tongji's plan, she said, preserved the axis for cultural activities and included a suggestion for more parks along its length.

All the designs aim to save much of what is left of Beijing's historic centre. "It's not too late," Mr Speer said. With billions of dollars being poured into the city for pre-Olympics construction, everyone is wondering how much of old Beijing will be left.

Many residents, such as Mr Cai, see new construction as a step forward. He said many of the old courtyard houses are run down - often with several people living in rooms as small as 20 square metres - lack private bathrooms and stand on prime real estate. But other people worry that as the *hutongs* come down, too much of what makes Beijing unique is being lost.

"It will be terrible if Beijing becomes like Singapore or Hong Kong," said Zhu Zhixuan, an architecture professor at Qinghua University. "If the city doesn't maintain connections with its history and culture it will be nothing."

Beijing was founded in about 1000BC and became China's capital in the 13th century. Until the Communists took charge in 1949, things changed slowly. But under Mao the government began a frenzy of destruction and construction.

In the 50s Beijing's city walls, and in the 60s most of the enormous gates that breached them, were deemed obstacles to modern transport and were torn down. Churches and temples were destroyed as the city's population swelled and the government attacked religion. Only through the work of a few leaders such as Zhou Enlai did larger monuments, such as the Forbidden City, escape the devastation of the Cultural Revolution.

"Before 1949, Beijing's old buildings had 500 or 600 years of history," Professor Zhu said. "We should have done everything we could to protect them but we didn't."

Professor Zhu says the government has become more aware of the value of remaining ancient architecture, and city leaders have set aside 10 protected zones in the past few years. But because of rapid growth, inefficient monitoring and corruption, "most of the *hutongs* in the city centre are gone".

According to Ms Sun, Mr Speer's plan tries to resolve tension between preservation and modernisation by restoring historic buildings and constructing new, environmentally sound and spatially appropriate structures around them, and by locating new development zones outside the central axis. Whatever the government does in Beijing may have wider ramifications.

"If leaders knock this city down, the same thing will happen all over the country," Professor Zhu said. "Only the government can protect our heritage."